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CIA Admits Cuban Virus

By Carole Agus

The CIA has admitted that information it supplied the Senate intelligence committee concerning a 1971 outbreak of African swine fever in Cuba was wrong.

The CIA was sent a formal inquiry last month by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence asking for a reply to a Newsday report that a virus associated with the animal disease was introduced into Cuba in 1971 with at least tacit approval of the CIA. The report quoted by members of the U.S. intelligence community who participated in the operation and said the deliberate introduction of the virus apparently set off an epidemic that forced the Cubans to slaughter 500,000 pigs.

In denying any involvement in the episode, the CIA told the intelligence committee that the disease had been carried to Cuba through dried, uncured meat imported from Europe. It went on to say that the U.S. Department

of Agriculture conducted a massive swine fever inoculation program on animals in the southeastern states, to prevent the spread of the disease. Yesterday they admitted they were wrong.

Newsday disclosed Jan. 15 that, according to internationally recognized experts in African swine fever, such inoculations do not exist. Agriculture Department officials have since noted that there never has been an African swine fever inoculation program, even on an experimental basis, in the Western Hemisphere. After the Newsday report, the intelligence committee contacted the CIA again, and the panel released yesterday a letter dated Tuesday in which the CIA said that "a check with the [agriculture] department indicates that there was no swine inoculation program."

The CIA also acknowledged in its letter that its explanation was wrong about how the virus—which never before had surfaced in the Western Hem-

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isphere—broke out in Cuba. The letter from the agency's legislative counsel noted that "the strain of virus found in Europe does not produce such high mortality rates" as were found in Cuba, suggesting that the virus may have come from Africa. But the CIA continued to deny any involvement in the outbreak.

The discrepancies in CIA versions of the incident led the intelligence committee to reopen its investigation of the affair, according to one committee source. "We are looking at this with a view to deciding . . . the desirability of holding hearings," the source said.

Agriculture Department officials, who launched a major information and screening program in 1971 after they learned about the outbreak in Cuba, said the disease easily could have been transmitted to the United States. "It's a particularly devastating type of disease. We don't want it anywhere near here," spokesman Sidney Moore said. "It's bad, bad news. It can spread very rapidly; it can spread widely before [it is] detected. There's a big flow of pigs from the Southeast up to the Midwest—it could have caused havoc. I don't believe anyone would have done it. It would certainly have been a very irresponsible thing on the part of anybody [to introduce the disease into Cuba]." CIA officials added yesterday that they were the first to inform the Agriculture Department about the 1972 Cuban outbreak.

William Hess, the microbiologist in charge of the African swine fever research program at Plum Island Animal Disease Laboratory said the disease easily could have entered the country. "People walking in farmyards and getting the excrement from pigs on their shoes could transmit it anywhere," he said. He said a U.S. outbreak, "by the time it was definitely diagnosed," would have destroyed about 10 percent of the country's pigs at a cost of about one billion dollars. "It could run that high very easily," Hess said.